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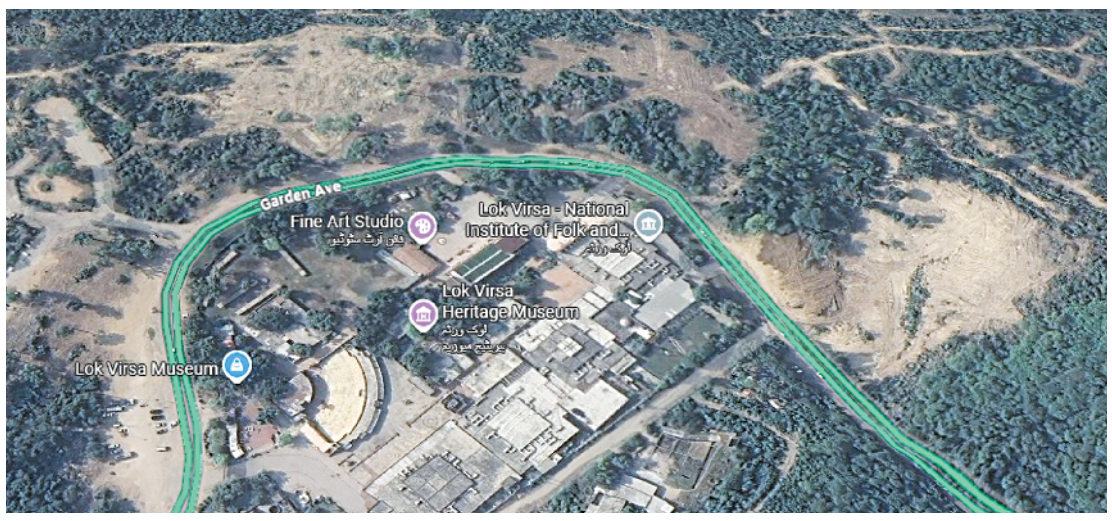

GOOGLE Maps' satellite view clearly shows how three large tracts of land have been cleared of their green cover around the Lok Virsa complex.

MISSING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

CDA has now embarked on a plantation campaign, in spite of the fact that the biting cold of January has never been a suitable time for fresh horticultural activities

By Kashif Abbasi in Islamabad

FOOTPRINTS

GARDEN Avenue, known locally as the Thandi Sarak or 'cool street', has a special place in the hearts and memories of nearly anyone who has ever lived in Islamabad.

Much like hiking on the Margalla trails or a trip to Rawal Lake, it is a quintessential way of experiencing the city.

One can also think of this area as the capital's 'tourist district', as it is where the Pakistan Monument and its attached museum, the Lok Virsa cultural hub, the Natural History Museum (with its famous outdoor-mounted whale skeleton), and a couple of swanky eateries are all located.

But of late, a drive down this shaded boulevard prompts a sense of agitation rather than tranquillity, thanks to the efforts of the capital's civic managers.

Over the past few weeks, a Capital Development Authority-sanctioned tree-felling drive has seen vast tracts of forest land being 'cleared' of their green cover.

These patches, located on the eastern side of Garden Avenue — running almost parallel to the Islamabad Expressway near Zero Point — are clearly visible on satellite maps of the area.

The tree-felling has been so severe that now, not only can one spot the white dome of the Met Office weather radar — located in H-8 — from here, even the Islamabad Expressway is clearly visible from Lok Virsa.

Although the CDA has maintained that it is merely complying with orders to eradicate paper mulberry trees — thought to be one of the vectors behind pollen-linked respiratory problems that some residents of the capital regularly experience — citizens, members of civil society and organisations such as WWF-Pakistan have all rightly called this explanation into question.

While the report focuses on construction work underway in H-8, on the other side of the Islamabad Expressway, its observations of the tree-felling in the Shakarparian area indicate that 'understory vegetation' — shrubs and smaller plants considered crucial for forest health — has been cleared and the soil has been heavily compacted, and needs immediate restoration.

But rather than coming clean about its plans, the CDA's knee-jerk response and the ill-advised plantation campaign it has embarked upon since the issue has garnered the media spotlight, has only deepened the quagmire.

This is because January is perhaps the least favourable time of year for any plantation drive in the capital, since the fledgling saplings will definitely struggle to weather the severe cold and frost that is characteristic of Islamabad's winters.

Capital's changing character

Amidst all the derisive inter-city banter, one thing even the most fervent Lahore- or Karachi-philes would concede is that Islamabad was an oasis of green-lined grid patterns amidst a country full of ungainly urban sprawl.

A case in point is Garden Avenue. Taking a meandering path through the dense foliage, it serves as a portal, whisking commuters from the hustle-bustle of Aabpara, through the soothing calm of the Shakarparian forest, and depositing them onto the Islamabad Expressway in virtually no time at all.

This is perhaps because the capital was built to plan; the brainchild of Greek architect and urban planner C. A. Doxiadis. His project brief on the design of our nation's capital categorised the metropolitan area into three distinct parts: the new city of Islamabad, the existing settlement of Rawalpindi, and the national park area adjoining both.

Despite the many changes to the original masterplan over the years, one thing that has remained constant is that the character of the land designated as national park land has remained constant. In his project brief, Doxiadis noted that this part of the capital "will retain certain agricultural functions for several years and where sites must be provided for a national sports centre, the national university, national research institute".

Granted, a civic authority's job is not easy and they certainly cannot please everyone, especially amid the clamour of conflicting interests (of which there are plenty), but the CDA's opacity on the matter is hard to reconcile.

THIS patch of land, located opposite the Lok Virsa complex, has been cleared of all shrubs and smaller plants, considered crucial for forest health.—Mohammad Asim

World's first ice sanctuary to preserve glaciers

PARIS: Scientists on Wednesday sealed ancient chunks of glacial ice in a first-of-its-kind sanctuary in Antarctica in the hope of preserving these fast-disappearing records of Earth's past climate for centuries to come.

The two ice cores taken from Europe's Alps are the first to be stored in a purpose-built snow cave on the frozen continent that one day should house an invaluable archive from across the globe.

Hosted at Concordia Station at 3,200 metres (10,500 feet) altitude in the heart of Antarctica, the ice sanctuary will protect the collection in natural cold storage at minus 52C without any need for refrigeration.

Ice cores shed precious light on climate conditions of millennia past, and these samples could help scientists of the future unlock their mysteries long after the glaciers themselves have melted away.

The sanctuary is really a cave, 35 metres long and five metres high and wide, dug roughly 10 metres below the surface into compact snow where freezing temperatures are constant.

In clear but freezing conditions at Concordia, roughly 1,000 kilometres (620 miles) from the coastline, scientists cut a blue ribbon as the final boxes containing core samples from Mont Blanc and Grand Combine were placed into the icy vault.

In the decades to come, scientists intend to stock the archive with glacial ice from alpine regions such as the Andes, Himalayas and Tajikistan.—AFP

Israeli attacks continue as Gaza truce plan moves into its second phase

• US sets sights on total demilitarisation, reconstruction • 15-member body, supervised by 'Board of Peace', to manage the enclave • Ex-UN envoy Nickolay Mladenov tipped to head board

CAIRO: US President Donald Trump's envoy said on Wednesday that a plan to end the Gaza war was now moving to Phase Two with a goal of disarming Hamas, despite a number of Israeli strikes during the ceasefire.

"We are announcing the launch of Phase Two of the President's 20-Point Plan to End the Gaza Conflict, moving from ceasefire to demilitarisation, technocratic governance, and reconstruction," envoy Steve Witkoff wrote on X.

The second phase will also include the setup of a 15-person Palestinian technocratic committee to administer post-war Gaza. Its formation was announced earlier on Wednesday by Egypt, a close US ally and mediator.

Phase Two "begins the full demilitarisation and reconstruction of Gaza, primarily the disarmament of all unauthorised personnel.

"The US expects Hamas to comply fully with its obligations, including the immediate return of the final deceased hostage. Failure to do so will bring serious consequences," he said.

Israel and Hamas in October signed off on Trump's 20-point plan, which mandates that a technocratic Palestinian body overseen by an international "Board of Peace" is meant to govern Gaza for a transitional period. Trump is moving to the second phase of the plan despite significant obstacles. The first phase has been shaken by issues including Israeli airstrikes in Gaza that have killed hundreds, a refusal by Hamas to disarm, the remains of one last Israeli hostage still not returned, and Israeli delays in reopening Gaza's Rafah border crossing with Egypt.

Hamas officials said earlier in the day that the group had opened talks with Egyptian mediators in Cairo on the committee, which forms part of Trump's truce plan for Gaza.

"We hope that following this agreement, the committee will be announced soon... and will then be deployed to the Gaza Strip to manage daily life and essential services," Abdelatty said.

The majority of the Palestinian factions offered their support to the committee after Abdelatty's announcement.

In a statement, the factions including Hamas and Islamic Jihad said they had agreed "to support the mediators' efforts in forming the Palestinian National Transitional Committee.

Potential committee heads

Separately, the Hamas delegation was also to hold talks in Cairo with leaders of other Palestinian factions on "political, national and field developments" and the state of the Gaza ceasefire, the official added.

Talks with Egyptian mediators were also focused on the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza, the reopening of the Rafah crossing, the entry of aid currently stockpiled on the Egyptian side of the border, and preparations for launching the second phase of the ceasefire plan, the official said.

The Trump proposed Board of Peace is expected to be led on the ground by former UN diplomat and politician Nickolay Mladenov, who has recently held talks with Israeli and Palestinian officials.— Agencies

Signs point to 'imminent' US attack on Iran

• Washington withdraws staff from Middle East bases; diplomatic contact cut off • Tehran threatens retaliation; informs Qatar, Saudi Arabia, others • Riyadh assures it won't allow its territory to be used against Iran

WASHINGTON: Tensions flared across the Middle East on Wednesday as the US began withdrawing personnel from crucial bases in the region, while Tehran warned that it would retaliate against American bases in the Gulf, if Washington initiated an attack.

The catalyst for the showdown is the violent protests within Iran. Trump has repeatedly threatened to intervene in support of protesters, declaring in a Tuesday interview that "help is on the way" and vowing "very strong action" if executions of demonstrators continue.

Meanwhile, President Donald Trump said in a press conference late on Wednesday night he had been told that killings in Iran's crackdown on nationwide protests were subsiding and that he believed there was currently no plan for large-scale executions.

The New York Times also reported that the Pentagon is considering a broader array of strike options than previously disclosed, potentially targeting Iran's nuclear facilities and ballistic missile sites.

European officials also cautioned that an American strike could be imminent. "All the signals are that a US attack is imminent, but that is also how this administration behaves to keep everyone on their toes. Unpredictability is part of the strategy," a Western military official said.

Meanwhile, a senior Iranian official said regional countries — including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey — had been informed that American bases within their borders will be targeted if the US strikes Iran.

Direct contact between Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi and US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff have also been suspended, the official added.

As of Wednesday, Britain was also withdrawing some personnel from an air base in Qatar, according to British media reports, though the defence ministry in London offered no immediate comment.

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the United States was pulling some personnel from bases in the region as a precautionary measure given the heightened friction.

Qatar confirmed that drawdowns from its Al Udeid air base, the largest US military hub in the Middle East, were "being undertaken in response to the current regional tensions."

Facing the threat of regional crossfire, Saudi Arabia moved to insulate itself. Two sources close to the kingdom's government said Riyadh explicitly informed Iran that it would not permit its territory to be used for offensive operations.

In light of the threats, the US Embassy in Saudi Arabia issued a directive urging staff and citizens to "exercise increased caution and limit non-essential travel to any military installations in the region." —Agencies

UK govt retreats on mandatory digital ID to work

U-turn follows an intense backlash against the plan

LONDON: UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer on Wednesday defended his decision to shelve plans to make a digital ID mandatory to work in Britain.

The latest U-turn in his Labour government's policies follows an intense backlash against plans to introduce a free digital ID for UK nationals and those residing in the country in a bid to curb illegal migration.

Officials briefed the British media late Tuesday that the new ID which had been proposed by the government in September would no longer be mandatory for employment.

"I'm determined to make it harder for people to work illegally in this country, and that is why there will be checks," Starmer told parliament. "They will be digital, and they will be mandatory."

Earlier, Finance Minister Rachel Reeves insisted the right to work would still be contingent on providing a form of digital verification.

"We are saying that you will need mandatory digital ID to be able to work in the UK," she told the *BBC*.

"Now the difference is whether that has to be one piece of ID — a digital ID card — or whether it could be an e-visa or an e-passport," Reeves added. "We're pretty relaxed about what form that takes."

There has been long-standing resistance in the UK to any plans to impose a mandatory ID, and the latest proposals from Starmer's government had sparked fierce opposition from rival political parties as well as public concern.

Some criticism, including from far-right figures, promoted unproven claims that it would be used to boost government control over people's lives.

They included fearmongering that digital ID will be used to store data on vaccinations and carbon footprint and limit access to flying and food, which the government has vehemently denied.

Starmer had said in September that the ID card would be introduced by 2029 and while it would not be mandatory, it would be required to prove the right to work.

Opposition politicians seized on the latest government reversal, which follows around a dozen other U-turns on various policies since centre-left Labour won power in July 2024.

"This is a victory for individual liberty against a ghastly, authoritarian government," Nigel Farage, leader of the anti-immigration Reform UK party, said.

He vowed to scrap the ID "altogether" if it wins power.

Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch told MPs the "mandatory digital ID was a rubbish policy" which the Tory party was "glad to see the back of".—AFP

2025 among world's three hottest years on record, WMO says

• Last three years ranked as hottest in history; temperatures continuously breach critical 1.5C limit • Ocean heat hits record highs, fuelling deadly storms, rains • Scientists warn Paris Agreement goals likely to fail before 2030

BRUSSELS: Last year was among the planet's three warmest on record, the World Meteorological Organisation said on Wednesday, as European Union scientists confirmed average temperatures have exceeded 1.5 degrees Celsius of global warming for the longest period since records began.

The WMO, which consolidates eight climate datasets from around the world, said six of them — including the European Union's European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) and the British national weather service — ranked 2025 as the third warmest.

Two datasets placed it as the second warmest in the 176-year record.

The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration also confirmed in data released on Wednesday that 2025 was the third-warmest year in its global temperature record, which dates back to 1850.

All eight datasets confirmed that the last three years were the planet's three hottest since records began, with 2024 ranking as the warmest year on record, the WMO said.

Temperature threshold breached

The slight differences in rankings reflect varying methodologies and types of measurements, including satellite data and readings from weather stations.

The ECMWF said 2025 rounded out the first three-year period in which the average global temperature was 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial era — the limit beyond which scientists expect global warming will unleash severe impacts, some of them irreversible.

"1.5 C is not a cliff edge. However, we know that every fraction of a degree matters, particularly for worsening extreme weather events," said Samantha Burgess, strategic lead for climate at the ECMWF. Burgess said she expected 2026 to be among the planet's five warmest years.

Managing the overshoot

Governments pledged under the 2015 Paris Agreement to try to avoid exceeding 1.5 degrees Celsius of global warming, measured as a decades-long average temperature compared with pre-industrial temperatures.

But the failure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions means that target could be breached before 2030, a decade earlier than predicted when the Paris accord was signed, the ECMWF said.

"We are bound to pass it," said Carlo Buontempo, director of the EU's Copernicus Climate Change Service. "The choice we now have is how to best manage the inevitable overshoot and its consequences on societies and natural systems."

Currently, the world's long-term warming level is about 1.4 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial era, the ECMWF said. Measured on a short-term basis, average annual temperatures breached 1.5 degrees Celsius for the first time in 2024.

NOAA said 2025 exceeded the pre-industrial average by 1.34 degrees Celsius (2.41 degrees Fahrenheit). The US agency also said upper ocean heat content reached a record high in 2025.

This indicates Earth's oceans have reached their highest heat levels, driving stronger storms, heavier rainfall and rising sea levels.

Extreme weather impacts

Exceeding the long-term 1.5-degree limit would lead to more extreme and widespread impacts, including hotter and longer heat waves, and more powerful storms and floods.

Already in 2025, wildfires in Europe produced the highest total emissions on record, while scientific studies confirmed specific weather events were made worse by climate change.

These included Hurricane Melissa in the Caribbean and monsoon rains in Pakistan, which killed more than 1,000 people in floods.

Despite worsening impacts, climate science is facing political pushback. US President Donald Trump, who has called climate change "the greatest con job", last week withdrew from dozens of UN entities, including the scientific Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The long-established consensus among the world's scientists is that climate change is real, mostly caused by humans and getting worse. Its main cause is greenhouse gas emissions from burning fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas, which trap heat in the atmosphere.—Reuters

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